MEAT & LIVESTOCK AUSTRALIA

tips&tools

FEEDLOTS

Yard weaning methods for preparing feeder cattle

The beef breeding industry needs to add value to its products wherever this is cost-effective. Each step in the production chain is important. The point of entry to the feedlot is a critical one because cattle are more likely to suffer from respiratory disease and poor weight gain if they are stressed during this period.

Young cattle can be vaccinated against respiratory diseases prior to entry to the feedlot in order to avoid sub-optimal performance and losses during the lot feeding phase. This allows them to adapt more easily to lot feeding.

By exploiting the fact that weaning is the critical learning time for young cattle, cattle can be well prepared for the lot feeding facility. The resulting gains in the feedlot will enhance the profitability of the industry and improve the backgrounding credentials of your enterprise.

Why is it important to 'prepare' feeder cattle?

Cattle producers can significantly improve the performance of cattle going into feedlots by following a simple pre-feedlot program involving yard weaning and pre-feedlot respiratory disease vaccination.

By adjusting production practices you can add value to your product because lot feeding facilities can add value to theirs. As an industry, we must make all efforts to tailor our product to market rather than attempt to shape our market to suit our product. Feeder cattle must be produced with the feedlot's goals and strategies in mind.

Optimal yard weaning methods

The method of weaning beef calves — whether or not they receive pre-feedlot vaccination against respiratory disease — can influence the subsequent health and weight gain of these animals. By following a simple specification of yard-weaning cattle for 5-7 days, significant gains can later be achieved in the lot feeding phase of operations. Weaning is the critical learning time for young cattle.

How can I improve my access to the lot feeding market?

Your reputation and record as a provider of well prepared feeder cattle is invaluable. If feedlots are not happy with the product you are supplying, they are less likely to take any more cattle. So it becomes important to prepare feeder cattle especially for your market — the feedlot.

By preparing your cattle in accordance with the research collated in this Tips & Tools, it is possible to achieve:

- weight gain sooner in the feedlot
- lower livestock health costs due to less sick pulls in the feedlot
- less deaths and sub-clinical respiratory disease in the feedlot
- a higher proportion of finished stock making the higher priced target market
- higher growth rates can mean reduced times to finish cattle with big feed cost savings
- higher growth rates also mean increased throughput per annum for the feedlot
- faster turn-off time can lead to earlier payments and lesser interest charges on the investment in cattle
- a negotiated premium for your superior feeder cattle

Guidelines for yard weaning:

- Well built, weaner-proof yards with good quality water
- Pen stocking density of 4m^2/head for 180-260 kg calves
- Feeders stocked with good quality hay or silage each day **(troughs and rations not necessary)**
- Kept in yards for five to seven days
- Some human presence each day but not specific training
- Reasonably sloped, non-bog surface
- Ideally, a solid opaque pen sides made from 1.2m rubber belting; considered optional capitalisation if other steps achieved

Summary of difference in margin per head in feedlot stage during research to 1997 (use cost figures as a relative guide not as budgetary advice):

After 90 days on feed	Improvement in gross margin ($/head)	Additional costs ($/head)	Estimate of added value ($/head)
Yard weaning with hay or silage for 10 days	30.50	5.0	25.00
Yard weaning plus pre-feedlot vaccination	33.00	15.00 (estimate)	18.00

A healthy and profitable feeder steer has to:

- Accept confinement and get onto feed and water quickly in the feedlot
- Have strong resistance against respiratory disease — partly a product of social compliance and cohesion
- Adapt easily to the initial social/psychological and metabolic stress involved with getting onto feed in the feedlot
- Achieve good feed conversion rates and weight gain through good adaptation individually and as a feeding group
- Accept vehicles, people, horses (not dogs), at close quarters
- Not suffer from foot abscesses etc
- Readily focus on its 'lessons' on how to adjust to the feedlot

Note: Yard-trained steers (where stock were trained to access grain from troughs) were also trialled but were found to have little or no difference on the economic impact from simply yard weaned stock.

Yard weaned cattle have a higher weight gain in the first month of lot feeding and over the 90-day period than cattle weaned in the paddock. The benefits of the simple procedure of yard weaning are principally realised during the feedlot stage of production due to the learned responses at weaning.

Yard weaning produces cattle that get onto feed quicker and suffer less from respiratory disease.

There is a lower incidence of disease in the yard weaned cattle compared to paddock weaned animals. Studies suggest that the proportion of yard weaned animals that have been pulled because of sickness is less than half of that of paddock weaned animals.

Vaccinations

Pre-feedlot vaccinations against respiratory disease can further significantly improve weight gain in the first month of lot feeding and over 90 days. The difference in studies to date has been consistently 8% (1.48 cf. 1.38 kg/day). A combination of yard weaning cattle and providing pre-feedlot vaccination produces the best performing feeder cattle. Whether or not this combination will provide a net benefit greater than simply yard weaned/unvaccinated cattle is dependant on inoculation costs and your market specifications, breed of cattle and other particulars of your operation.

Research background

This Tips & Tools draws heavily on research project DAN.069 May 1997.

The bottom line

The best group of feeder cattle is one socially established at yard weaning; the worst is one thrown together from multiple sources at feedlot induction.

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